

The Heiress Who Helped End School Segregation: the Hilde Mosse Story

Episode 21 of *Exile* with Mandy Patinkin

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MANDY PATINKIN: It's rush hour in New York City, 1942. The streets are alive with people who have places to be. In the throng, a small group of doctors weave their way across town to somewhere...unexpected. Their destination is not a hospital or home visit, but the dark, cramped basement of a small church in Harlem. They have many hours of work ahead. Dr. Hilde Mosse walks with purpose. She is tired but determined. Suddenly, Hilde's footsteps slow to a halt. Her dark eyes have zeroed in, not on the familiar church, but on the people lined up outside of it. Stretching down the block are the uneasy faces of young men, women and children. Some look agitated. Others are clearly in pain. All of these people would need help, and quickly. This was going to be a long night. As Hilde approaches the church, she wonders...how on earth did an heiress to a fortune end up here?

THEME MUSIC

MANDY PATINKIN: Welcome to Exile, a podcast from LBI, the Leo Baeck Institute New York. I'm Mandy Patinkin. When everything is taken away, then what? From LBI's archives, untold stories of Jewish lives in the shadow of fascism. Today, the story of an heiress-turned-doctor who worked to treat the symptoms of a racist system.

THEME OUT

MANDY PATINKIN: January 28, 1930. A party was underway on the grounds of a palatial mansion in central Berlin.

ROGER STRAUCH: This was the Mosse Palais, as it was known. And then there was a lot of staff, a lot of attention, too much attention. And the lifestyle was just that of what you see in the movies.

MANDY PATINKIN: This is Roger Strauch, Hilde's nephew. At the Mosse Palais, Hilde was standing with her father, Hans, and her mother, Felicia. It was her 18th birthday,

and a surprise awaited her: Hilde's very first car. A Hanomag. A zippy convertible, all curves with hints of glittering chrome. An extravagant gift, especially for the time. Hilde's family was not just wealthy. They were one of the richest families in Berlin—the proud owners of a vast publishing empire.

ROGER STRAUCH: It takes one's breath away to think of how influential and how powerful they were.

MANDY PATINKIN: You might remember Roger Strauch from Season 1 of *Exile*, which charts his quest to find a work of art that had been looted by the Nazis. A piece that was commissioned by Hilde's grandfather, Rudolf.

ROGER STRAUCH: Hilde's grandfather, he supported expeditions in Egypt. He went around trying to look for and support artists, musicians, and fine art creators, sculptors, painters and architects. There was literally almost nothing beyond the economic reach of the grandfather.

MANDY PATINKIN: None of this would be possible without the Mosse family's flagship newspaper, *The Berliner Tageblatt*. Renowned for its intrepid journalists, the publication championed democracy, open society, and progressive politics. The Mosse family were titans of a new kind of industry: the media. They were also cultural change makers.

HILDE MOSSE: When I saw the car, I was overcome by a tremendous feeling of energy and a sense of adventure, which made me feel happy.

MANDY PATINKIN: And yet, something wasn't quite right. Beneath the surface, a silent storm was brewing. Hilde felt uneasy... a feeling she later captured in a diary entry.

HILDE MOSSE: I don't need the car at all, it's pure luxury and I'm afraid it will chain me too much to external things. How much purer...more real my joy would be if my parents had given the money to children who need it.

ROGER STRAUCH: Aunt Hilde, she had tremendous passion, tremendous intellect, and she had strong opinions. They were amongst the super rich of Germany and the world. And, um, that was disgusting to her, although she lived

in the lap of luxury. And she felt the people who have these kinds of comforts need to do a better job of sharing it. She wasn't at all comfortable with the lifestyle that she was leading. And that her parents were leading. She really rejected it. But hers was an intellectual rejection and it was fierce and forceful.

MANDY PATINKIN: Looking around at the gallery of grinning faces, Hilde was sure of one thing: she was not the same as them.

ROGER STRAUCH: If her father said right, she'd say left. Literally. To the point where her relationship with her father, who she referred to as Pappy, was severely strained.

MANDY PATINKIN: Hilde's mind was made up. She was going to be *more* than a socialite, a philanthropist, or a well-kept housewife.

HILDE MOSSE: I know that my life is structured differently than they can understand. My values are very, very different. But when I live together with them, only their values matter. How I long to be part of a community, a community in which and for which I can work so that my life would have a meaning beyond myself.

MANDY PATINKIN: A few months earlier, in October 1929, the American stock market had crashed, and the Great Depression hit Germany like a tidal wave. Poverty was tightening its grip on the nation. Soon after, Hilde joined a youth group in Berlin. At meetings, they served meals, they helped local kids with homework, and did what they could to make sure those kids were well taken care of. This was a place of refuge from the chaos outside. A place where children from all over Berlin could find stability. It was called "The Flock." A place for birds of a feather to support one another—and perhaps change the world.

ELIZABETH HARVEY: The ideal was youth giving itself its own identity, its own laws, creating a sort of realm for itself, a sort of autonomy of youth. Youth determining its own destiny, without, in a sense, a sort of anti-authoritarian streak to it.

MANDY PATINKIN: Dr. Elizabeth Harvey is an historian of twentieth-century Europe, and an expert on the youth movements of Weimar Germany.

ELIZABETH HARVEY: This idea of taking responsibility for your own group at a very young age is, I think, something quite distinctively German. You know, a fairly organized, bourgeois movement that starts off with small groups, but then becomes a network led by youth.

MANDY PATINKIN: These groups spent lots of time meeting, mingling, and exchanging ideas. But as time went on, and life got harder, they began to change.

ELIZABETH HARVEY: I would say socialist youth groups, they see the appeal, potential appeal, of this idea that youth should organise itself. It's something that shouldn't be restricted to a group of bourgeois grammar school types, it should be something for everyone.

MANDY PATINKIN: The problems facing Germany seemed to multiply day by day. The country was in crisis. The government had fractured, and the ends of the political spectrum were moving further and further apart.

ELIZABETH HARVEY: There's a sort of general move towards the late 20s into the early 30s towards maybe a more militant style, a martial style, is being adopted by socialists, communists, but also, really, the right wing parties are creating groups of youngsters, marshalling them. There's a sort of splintering politically of the youth movement, with everything from the communists to the Hitler Youth.

MANDY PATINKIN: Fascism was blooming and young Nazi supporters had begun to threaten the meetings of democratic and left-leaning groups. But Hilde remained resolute. She didn't give in to the fear. There was, after all, work to be done. At only 18, she had the presence of mind to look ahead—to think of the future.

HILDE MOSSE: I have this tic, I can't get rid of it. I want to advance humanity. Fight for humanity! But how? How can I use my talents and abilities most

effectively for the benefit of humankind? Maybe I can do that by helping bodies, by helping minds, by studying medicine!

MANDY PATINKIN: It was still rare for women to take this route, but as a doctor, Hilde knew she could put her values, and intelligence, to the test. But just as Hilde was developing her political and social conscience, a force in Germany had marked her as an enemy, all because of her name. The Mosses' progressive newspaper had been openly critical of the National Socialist project. And that criticism had not gone unnoticed. Joseph Goebbels was now running the Nazi Party's propaganda machine. And he had his sights set on the Mosse family's influential empire.

ROGER STRAUCH: There was a real relationship between Hitler and his chief propagandist, one of the architects of the Nazi movement, and this family. Hitler mentioned the name Mosse in his speeches more than any other Jewish family's name.

MANDY PATINKIN: Hilde may not have been aware at the time, but every member of the Mosse family had become a target. The clock was ticking. By 1933, Hilde was studying medicine at the University of Bonn in western Germany. She was a good student, and enjoyed life by the River Rhine. But on March 23rd of that year, the German government passed the Enabling Act. Now, Adolf Hitler had the power to enact new laws without consulting parliament or anyone else.

ROGER STRAUCH: There was no hope once Hitler was in power.

MANDY PATINKIN: The very next day, the Mosse family's assets were violently seized, and the children needed to flee as quickly as possible.

ROGER STRAUCH: So Hilde would have been presented with the challenge of how to navigate escape under duress, which was life threatening.

MANDY PATINKIN: Hastily, she applied to a university in Switzerland. Her grades were good, and she was quickly accepted. Hilde packed her bags, and said goodbye to Germany, her family, and her friends. It was time to set out on her own. For the first time in her life, money was tight. Contact with her family was sporadic. They were safe, but

they were German, so they were treated with suspicion. What would become of them? What would become of her? And would Hilde, like so many others, be tormented by memories of the people she'd left behind?

HILDE MOSSE: Most Jews who have to flee from insane nationalists flee into exactly the same nationalism. But how many are strong enough to endure loneliness? I realise more and more what it means to be away from Germany. No longer in touch with the only people I belong to, who I love as I will love no other.

MANDY PATINKIN: Hilde's student visa offered her precarious protection from the threat of deportation. At the start of each term, she anxiously awaited a verdict: Would she be able to stay, or would she be sent back to Germany? By 1937, Hilde had less than a year left in her studies. Soon she would be a doctor—a pediatrician. But the Nazis were restricting the movements of Jews more and more. And they had passed a law that made it almost impossible for Jewish doctors to practice. Hilde was about to graduate, but her home country wasn't safe for her anymore. So, in the winter of 1938, Dr. Hilde Mosse boarded a ship bound for America. A year later, Hilde was settled in a modest apartment in Manhattan, working diligently in the psychiatric ward at Queens General Hospital. She had a high ranking position for a woman — and she wasn't even thirty years old.

DENNIS DOYLE: Even in the 1930s, women were having a difficult time getting into any medical school, let alone getting an internship, getting a fellowship to go into a specialty like psychiatry.

MANDY PATINKIN: Dennis Doyle is an historian of psychiatry. He's written extensively on the work of Hilde Mosse and another psychiatrist, Dr. Frederic Wertham.

DENNIS DOYLE: Werthem's reputation in the field was that he was idiosyncratic. But he was also imperious. He had a very 'my way or the highway' approach. He's very difficult to work with. He did not keep jobs.

MANDY PATINKIN: Like Hilde, Frederic was a German emigree. He was an intellectual with a range of interests.

DENNIS DOYLE: He was the head of psychiatry at Queens Mass General. And Hilde Mosse, she was hired on as her first major job here in the United States. I think she was probably very surprised that a male psychiatrist, that he actually acknowledged that she was an accomplished psychoanalyst when other male psychiatrists just typically did not take female analysts seriously.

MANDY PATINKIN: Hiring women wasn't the only thing that made Frederic more progressive than some of his colleagues. With his influence, Hilde began to learn what psychiatric treatment looked like for Black patients in America.

DENNIS DOYLE: So, heading into the '40s, most white psychiatrists, especially the older generation, still subscribed to a series of racial assumptions, essentially racial exceptionalism. They're still very receptive to the idea that you do have to make adjustments for racial difference when you're dealing with an African American patient. Definitely, in terms of the way that they saw the Black psyche, they saw it as being, from the get go, different than a white psyche. And since they believed that race was somehow physiologically producing different bodies. It meant that those different bodies must also have different psyches. But Frederic Wertham was very social justice-focused. He crossed those barriers. It just was par for the course for him.

MANDY PATINKIN: And Hilde was beginning to build a clinical approach of her own. She had been working almost exclusively with children, seeing them in clinics and in schools across New York City.

ELLEN GOLDING: When we got into the profession of psychology, most of the physicians and psychiatrists were white.

MANDY PATINKIN: Dr. Ellen Golding was the first Black psychology intern in the New York City school system, and worked under Hilde when she was a young psychologist in training.

ELLEN GOLDING: She had this, it had to have been from Europe, this little folding footstool she used to carry with her. That's what I remember about her.

And when she would sit down and talk with me, she'd stretch her legs out and put her feet on the stool. And like she was at home, relaxing in front of the television or something.

MANDY PATINKIN: But that's not all Ellen remembers about Hilde.

ELLEN GOLDING: Once a Black child was referred to a psychologist in the school system, the child's fate was very shaky. So many times they get shovelled into places where they really, really shouldn't be. Even when psychiatrists who are white or who are very good and very caring, they still don't know what it feels like to be in our skin, what it feels like to be you. But public service is a great calling. Dr. Mosse, well, she had a great calling.

MANDY PATINKIN: Hilde had started to see that behavioral issues in the classroom were directly connected to challenges with reading.

ELLEN GOLDING: Dr. Mosse said children who have difficulty in reading will start to act up when they know reading is coming. And they're going to be feeling inferior, they're going to be feeling anxious. In order not to go into the special classes, you had to have an IQ of at least 76 or above. And Dr. Mosse and I talked about how test anxiety is a very strong thing with children who don't achieve as high as they could. Many of our children were misdiagnosed, often mislabeled, or had racist psychologists who labelled our children as retarded who were not.

MANDY PATINKIN: Hilde began to see that this mislabeling of students, especially Black students, could lead to far more brutal treatment.

DENNIS DOYLE: Mosse used to complain about this. She was seeing kids who had dyslexia and other kinds of learning disabilities, people who had these kind of low level behavioural issues and learning issues being misdiagnosed with something like psychoses, schizophrenia, and other types of extreme personality disorders.

ELLEN GOLDING: That's why they call 'em the "Bus to Bellevue" because many, many of the children were misdiagnosed and they were given shock treatment.

DENNIS DOYLE: So this is volts of electric current given to children. Hilde Mosse really, she wrote an article once about this. She could see that this was inherently cruel. Oh, it just made her viscerally angry. It was clear this was racial discrimination.

MANDY PATINKIN: Hilde was determined to change this way of thinking, and take an entirely new approach.

ELLEN GOLDING: Dr. Mosse helped me in seeing the individuation of children and looking for their strengths. That you see children as worthy, no matter what their limitations are, and try to enhance their life, even with the challenges that they are met in a ghetto. She had so much wisdom and her insight about groups other than her own, to understand the struggles of people who were poor and who didn't have the opportunities that she had. That's an extraordinary person. And that's a great person.

MANDY PATINKIN: Why, thought Hilde, should access to high quality, safe psychoanalysis be monopolized by the elite? Or those with white skin? Frederic Wertham had the same thought. He, too, was looking to do something different. Something new. Frederic had been exchanging letters with the Black American writer Richard Wright. They wrote back and forth about the relationship between racism, crime, and mental illness. And together, they came up with the idea to establish a radical new psychiatric clinic in Harlem. The clinic would be accessible to those who needed it. And it would be named after the renowned Marxist thinker and physician Paul LaFargue.

DENNIS DOYLE: It is a complete experiment. It is so unique and so different from what was going on in psychiatry in so many different ways. It starts off with this absolutely groundbreaking kind of assumption that there is no difference between the psyche of someone who's white and the psyche of someone who's

Black. That was so different than what was going on in psychiatry at the time. And if you couldn't accept that, you were not allowed to work there.

MANDY PATINKIN: Hilde was excited by the idea. This clinic could help fill a psychiatric chasm in New York City. And then Frederic asked her something unexpected: would she like to run it? Hilde's nephew Roger Strauch can guess what her reaction was.

ROGER STRAUCH: Aunt Hilde, she would have been passionate to her last molecule about such a concept.

MANDY PATINKIN: Two months after the LaFargue clinic opened its doors in a church basement in Harlem, a long line of men, women and children stretched down the block. Open on Tuesdays and Thursday nights, the services at Lafargue cost 25 cents—unless you couldn't afford to pay, in which case they were free. The money was used to ferry some of the most vulnerable patients home after difficult sessions, in the comfort and safety of local taxis. With no outside funding, Hilde now lead a dedicated team of volunteer clinicians, psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers. They all followed the principles of social psychiatry.

DENNIS DOYLE: Social psychiatry involves the idea that personality actually is expressed in a social or cultural context. And so if you really want to treat a patient, you need to look at their immediate environmental stressors and conditions and see what you can do to adapt people to those stressors or conditions or perhaps try to overcome those conditions. So that could involve things like oh, you're finding out that someone is experiencing anxiety. They would ask you, so how are you dealing with the Bureau of Welfare? If my kids aren't sleeping because there's a train that goes by all the time, well, let's see if we can get you to move. We'll move you some place, we'll see if we can get you new housing.

MANDY PATINKIN: For Hilde and her colleagues, mental health was about more than what was happening in their patients' minds. It was about their whole lives—their financial situations, their family dynamics, and the prejudice they experienced on a day-to-day basis. At the clinic, they treated people in groups, allowing patients to

engage with each other, to feel less alone. Hilde's days ended well past closing time. The work was demanding, but rewarding. Patients were starting to get better. And yet, Hilde was troubled by a disturbing trend.

DENNIS DOYLE: Their space was limited. So, they had to be really creative right away. When you have kids, they come into a waiting room. Kids don't sit. Kids wander around and climb over their parents and climb over stuff. So, on a practical basis, they brought in toys. And then the toys eventually, thanks to one of the staffers, Clesby Daniels, a child therapy expert, play therapy. And something innovative, they set up these interracial playgroups for children. In those playgroups that they started there, these interracial playgroups, they began to notice several things.

MANDY PATINKIN: Some very young children were presenting worrying symptoms. Their academic achievement was far behind their peers. Some were withdrawn. Others displayed erratic behaviour. One case, in particular, caught Hilde's attention. A Black 6-year-old boy was brought in by his mother. In recent months, his behaviour had changed dramatically. He had become difficult at school, disruptive at home, and aggressive with his baby sister. He also had strange fits—sudden attacks of breathlessness that came out of the blue. They were happening almost every day. The family had recently moved from Harlem to a neighbourhood in Queens. Flipping through case notes, Hilde's eyes landed on another detail. Along with this new neighbourhood came a new school—where almost all of the child's classmates were white. In one session, the boy turned to his mother and said that some of his white playmates had expressed fear that if they touched him, they would “turn colored too”. For Hilde, this was disturbing proof of what Black communities across America already knew.

DENNIS DOYLE: They were beginning to see that Black children and white children, they responded in particular ways to images of African-Americans within comic books first and in other pop culture. And they saw that what kids were exhibiting was they understood that, oh, you're supposed to respond to them negatively. You're not supposed to respond to the image of an African-American positively. This message of inferiority was being sent, received, and then

resulting in essentially lowered self-esteem and poor mental health. That racism, it was actually causing medical harm.

MANDY PATINKIN: In 1951, Frederic Wertham received a letter from a lawyer named Jack Greenberg. He was representing clients of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in a case that they hoped would help demolish racial segregation across the American school system. Greenberg wanted Frederic and Hilde to help him disprove the idea that separate could ever truly be equal. To win in court, he needed medical proof that segregation caused harm. Hilde thought about the therapeutic playgroups at the Clinic. What if they used the same method on a larger scale? And in a clinical setting? Perhaps they could replicate what they'd been seeing anecdotally for years. So in October 1951, Hilde welcomed thirteen children, both Black and white, to the LaFargue clinic from segregated schools and neighbourhoods in Delaware.

DENNIS DOYLE: The kids were then integrated into the existing playgroups that they already had in the clinic at the time, which were interracial to begin with, and to see if they could actually find evidence that racism actually does, in this case racial segregation does actually damage mental health. That it actually promotes low self-esteem.

MANDY PATINKIN: Over the next few weeks, Hilde observed how the children interacted when placed in interracial playgroups. She could see that some of the white children were beginning to identify with their new Black peers. They were becoming friends. Others maintained a sense of superiority, something they likely learned from years of racial segregation. And when the Black students talked to therapists about their experiences in segregated schools, they expressed that segregation itself felt like a punishment. But they didn't know what they had done wrong. Hilde could see the mechanism of a racist system working in real time.

DENNIS DOYLE: Mosse used to complain about seeing kids rights are being violated because they're being exposed to a psychological stimuli that white kids were not exposed to, and that this was causing harm. And that harm was racial

segregation and institutional racism. Eliminating it was going to benefit the public writ large, including even white people were going to benefit from it emotionally. And that helped to really make that argument stick.

MANDY PATINKIN: On April 1, 1952, judge Chancellor Collins J. Seitz vowed to end school segregation in Delaware. In his closing statements, Chancellor Seitz referred directly to the work of the LaFargue clinic and Dr Frederic Wertham's testimony in court: "One of America's foremost psychiatrists testified that state-imposed school segregation produces in Negro children an unsolvable conflict which seriously interferes with the mental health of such children." Later that year, some segregated white Delaware schools began admitting Black pupils for the first time. Born of necessity, LaFargue's therapeutic groups were now part of an academic record and legal precedent that contested state-sponsored segregation. Hilde's nephew, Roger, again.

ROGER STRAUCH: The work turned out to be important and also impactful on society. And was impactful in the Brown v. Board of Education decision that helped transform American life.

MANDY PATINKIN: A few years later, in May 1954, the American Supreme Court unanimously declared school segregation unconstitutional. This tiny clinic made a lasting and positive impact on history. And yet, by 1957, the LaFargue clinic had no financial backer. Despite Hilde and Frederic's best efforts, neither the government nor New York's philanthropists would fund the clinic. Then, one day, the church that housed LaFargue said it needed the basement for something else. The clinic's home for 12 years was now gone. Despite its waitlist of hundreds of names, the LaFargue clinic was forced to close its doors for good. Hilde saw her last patient there on November 1, 1958.

DENNIS DOYLE: Oh, it definitely left a hole. I found this best expressed when I saw an interview with the first Chief Psychiatrist of Harlem Hospital's Psychiatric Wing. It's a desert. It's like a mental health desert. With the exception of the Northside Clinic in Harlem, that was pretty booked solid and only dealt with kids. So the bulk of patients at Lafargue were adults. And they were out of luck. She actually wrote an unpublished manuscript. It really paints the clinic as this kind of

golden age. It felt like a bracket in history, this amazing bracket. I got a kind of sense that this for her was something unique. And, nothing before it, nothing since.

MANDY PATINKIN: Hilde never married or had children of her own, but she never stopped working with or for them. She took a job as a psychiatrist at the New York Bureau of Child Guidance and the Board of Education.

DENNIS DOYLE: She becomes most known as their reading disabilities expert. And she was one of the first people to really see that connection between reading disabilities and emotional disturbances.

MANDY PATINKIN: She lived in a modest second-floor apartment in Manhattan. She also got a new car.

ROGER STRAUCH: Hilde had a car with a sunroof that could open. And what she liked to do is with all those lousy drivers in Manhattan, when she got mad at a driver she'd pump her fist right through the roof and it would really piss off other people that she would do that, especially a woman. And that was her luxury in life. She could just do that.

MANDY PATINKIN: Over 12 years, the Lafargue Clinic served thousands of patients and changed the lives of many. Hilde Mosse made a mark on a community, on psychiatry, and on history. Her legacy is a testament to the power of compassion, resilience, and the relentless pursuit of justice.

ROGER STRUACH: She was willing to start on the ground floor to make an impact. She could try to make a difference. And, unlike so many of us, didn't need to flaunt it, didn't need to broadcast it in order to be a happy person. And I think that's super cool.

ELLEN GOLDING: The foundation that Dr. Mosse helped to give me, the knowledge and the motivation to try to be excellent in what we did. She was absolutely impactful in my life. And to this day, I feel her presence. It sounds funny to say this, but it's true.

THEME MUSIC

ANNOUNCER: In addition to photographs, school records, and correspondence spanning Hilde Mosse's entire lifetime, the Mosse Family Collection in the LBI Archives includes the diaries she kept between 1928 and 1934, from the ages of 16 to 22. Hilde's papers are just part of the extensive holdings related to the Mosse Family at LBI. See them at lbi.org/hilde. Exile is a production of the Leo Baeck Institute, New York and Antica Productions. It's narrated by Mandy Patinkin. This episode was written by Lauren Armstrong-Carter. Our executive producers are Laura Regehr, Rami Tzabar, Stuart Coxe, and Bernie Blum. Our producer is Emily Morantz. Research and translation by Isabella Kempf. Voice acting by Hannah Gelman. Sound design and audio mix by Philip Wilson. Theme music by Oliver Wickham. This episode of Exile is made possible in part by a grant from the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, which is supported by the German Federal Finance Ministry and the Foundation Remembrance, Responsibility and Future.